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ABSTRACT

Given the vulnerability of the language arts to "back to basics" pressures, it is wise to consider the purposes that literature serves for young readers. Children read for a variety of reasons, including to escape, to understand themselves and others, and to learn about other times, places, and peoples. Characteristics of excellence to look for when choosing books for young readers center on seven areas: (1) characterization--the people must be believable; (2) dialogue--conversations should sound like real people talking; (3) setting--descriptions should be vivid; (4) plot--sequence of events must be at least compelling, if not logical and believable; (5) conflict--should be carefully constructed; (6) resolution--should be successful, either positive, neutral, negative, or not resolved; and (7) theme--should be an element of literary evaluation, what is left when all the details are stripped away. After sharing a book with children, a teacher can plan many kinds of follow-up activities, although some books may require a silent reaction and rethinking. Verbal, verbal and physical, visual, musical, and written are some of the response modes possible. Every child responds with zest to one of these techniques at one time or another, but it requires a sensitive teacher to know when a certain activity is appropriate and when it is best to let the book speak for itself. (Various children's book titles are suggested throughout this essay.) (HTH)

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Literature: Basic in the Language Arts Curriculum

John Warren Stewig

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Literature: Basic in the Language Arts Curriculum*

by

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In an era when more and more teachers and administrators are being harrassed by media-induced hype for a return to the "basics," it is important to define what is meant by that term. Too frequently, proponents of such a return really mean an emphasis on isolated facts and skills, without any significant attention to larger questions of purpose and outcomes of schooling.

The language arts are as susceptible to such pressures as other parts of the curriculum. Teachers who know the value of composition, literature, and wholistic language study, are being forced into focusing on fragmented bits and pieces. One area, literature, is especially vulnerable to such pressures, and the more easily measured parts of the curriculum receive increasing emphasis.

FUNCTIONS OF LITERATURE

Why Literature for Children?

Why is literature for children such a sturdy plant? Why do publishing houses continue to bring out an increasing variety of books, avidly pursued by children who understand the lure of books? What purposes does literature serve for child readers?

The most obvious answer is: simple <u>enjoyment</u>. Anyone who has ever felt the pure, sensuous pleasure of following a character through a set of

*Speech originally given at the National Association of Elementary School Principals convention; St. Louis, April 10, 1983.

experiences knows this delight. Things happen to adventuresome Miss Hickory though she is by no means as passive as her doll construction might indicate. This old favorite, by Carolyn Bailey, remains fresh. Children also enjoy a tramp through the woods of Haw Bank, searching for hazelnuts and blackberries with Keith and David. That setting in Earthfasts by William Mayne is pure enjoyment to be savored. Countless other examples exist of books children read for enjoyment alone, a prime purpose in reading.

Both of these are for intermediate-grade readers, but younger children also read for this purpose. Continually funny author Marjorie Sharmat has written Mr. Jameson and Mr. Phillips, the enjoyable story of two friends who seek refuge from the hustle and bustle of city life. Unfortunately, they discover that their good nature soon changes the peace of the island. Sharmat's books are always lighthearted, dealing deftly with solvable problems. Older readers will chuckle their way through her Maggie Marmelstein for President.

A second reason children read is to escape from present situations. For many children, reading offers a temporary diversion, a means of getting away from problems that seem insoluble. There is no reason to look down upon this function. Even more mature adults need escape from the intensity of current problems, though too few know how effective reading is in serving this purpose.

Lily At the Table by Linda Heller is a clear remembrance captured in a wordless book format, of how entrapped a child feels confronting a plate of unwanted food. Imaginative Lily uses the food in a variety of clever ways.

Older readers would be captivated by Louise Lawrence's Star Lord. In it she tells a compelling adventure tale set in a forbidding land.

> It had been blasted, a whole area of mountain, like a great black scar on the flank of the Mawrrhyn. Rhys stood at the edge of it. Grass and heather still smoked. Heat devils danced at the center of the fire that had burned and died into bare earth. His boots disturbed puffs of hot ash. He couldn't walk into the black center of heat. Nothing could. There was nothing alive in the pit of the crater. Clouds drifted over it like a shroud. The falling dampness touched and turned to steam. There was a sadness in Rhys. He had never seen such total devastation.

Devoted readers also read because books stimulate the imagination. Effective fiction makes us wonder about the nature of a character, the look of an environment, the reason behind a twist of plot, or the nature of an unspecified outcome. Effective nonfiction stimulates us to wonder further as questions are answered and we think of new questions the book generates.

Good books make us wonder about the nature of a character. A Summer in the South is another book for intermediate-grade readers by James Marshall. In it we are introduced to:

The hotelkeeper - a turkey who loves his hotel;

Foster Pig - a cantankerous porcine fellow;

Don Coyote - a dapper gentleman;

The Traveling String Quartet - a mysterious foursome;

Eleanor Owl - a famous detective on vacation;

Mr. Paws - Miss Owl's mild-mannered assistant; and,

Marietta Chicken - a very beautiful lady.

Effective authors also cause us to wonder about the look of an environment. Simon Underground, Joanne Ryder, is successfully augmented by John Schoenherr's pictures.

> Underneath the ground, deep down, the earth is warm and soft. It was a good place to spend the winter. Seeds were resting. Roots were slowly growing. Speckled toads were sleeping soundly. Tiny curled-up worms were breathing in gentle whispers. It was quiet deep down. Only a little mole was busy. Scrape, scrape, thwish. Simon was digging tunnels, winter tunnels into the earth.

> He scratched the dark brown dirt and pushed it behind him, slowly moving deeper and deeper. Scrape, scrape, thwish. Simon listened to the falling dirt. It was his sound, and it made him happy.

Another reason we read is to understand ourselves and others. Children whose determination sometimes gets them into trouble can read the message about determination incorporated so skillfully into the saga of Rufus M by Eleanore Estes. A child who feels neglected because his or her physical appearance is unlike other children's can read about A Girl Called Al and her feelings. This successful realistic fiction book is by Constance Greene.

Some books reflect common, ordinary life occurrences, and we know ourselves and others better by reading them. Teddy by Enid Warner Romanek, depicts the everyday life of a child of three except that this "child" is a teddy bear who has human child dolls. The art work, by the author, is done in etching, an unusual medium in children's books.

We also read to gain understanding of others who are unlike ourselves. Lewis, who is ten, finds out what it is like to be old when he encounters Mr. Madruga in A Likely Place. In this book by Paula Fox, he also finds out that despite the disparity in their ages they can be friends. Children can come closer to an understanding of what it would be like to be blind by reading the hauntingly beautiful Sound of Sunshine, Sound of Rain. Blindness is natural for the unamed boy in this story by Florence Perry Heide.

Ursula LeGuin wrote The Farthest Shore, a book children might read to gain understanding of self and others. Ancient mages of Enlad had forgotten their spells before the boy Ged brought the bad news that trouble was coming. The mage Roke is unlike any character we have ever really met, but this only enhances our interest in him.

Children also read to understand the nature of language. They can learn about the dialects of people in different parts of our country in such books as Strawberry Girl. The author, Lois Lenski, reproduces in detail the dialect of the Florida Crackers, a group of Anglo-Saxons from the Carolinas. At one point Essie comments:

> "Pa . . . iffen that cow laps her tongue around the new leaves, she'll twist the bark loose and pull it off. Do we stop her, she might could eat up all them orange trees."

In addition to books containing American dialects, several authors use dialect from other countries. Among these is a black author and translator, Lorenz Graham. He provides a strong version of the David and Goliath story, told in Liberian English in David He No Fear. Another example is The Shopping Basket by John Burningham. This is an amusing tale of a young boy who goes to the grocery and is detained by an improbable array of threatening animals. As he goes to buy a package of crisps, one of the animals says, "Give me those apples or I'll thump you."

Books can show other kinds of language differences or ways in which language changes as people grow older. Clara Judson exemplifies this use of language. In Abraham Lincoln, his language changes from the simple, untutored home language of his childhood to the more polished, slightly formal dialect spoken when he was president.

Related to oral language is the nonverbal language that accompanies the spoken word. Gesture is part of nonverbal language. Marie Hall Ets, the author of Talking Without Words provides charming lithograph illustrations that show common uses of gesture. Children can learn about the stylized use of gesture perfected by the mime in The Marcel Marceau Alphabet Book

illustrated with four-color photographs. People in other cultures also use gesture, sometimes in highly codified systems which carry prescribed meaning. In Talking Hands--Indian Sign Language, author Aline Amon uses simple sentences to describe the life of a typical plains Indian boy.

In addition to oral and nonverbal language, children learn about written language, as in the ideographs used to record a winter hunt in The Sioux Indians. Indian pictographs tell the engrossing story in How Medicine Man Cured Paleface Woman, a book by Jessie McGraw.

Children can become aware of the qualities of words in Sparkle and Spin. This unique book, handsomely illustrated with pictures that reinforce the qualities discussed, is by Ann and Paul Rand. Big words, small words, comforting, whispering, sound-alike words: the qualities of each are depicted in sophisticated collage illustrations combining cut paper, newspaper, ink, and photographs.

Another author, this one a poet, has captured word qualities memorably in Words Words Words. In her poem, "Forget," Mary O'Neill likens the word to a hider in a long black cape, for ". . . Nothing that happens goes truly away . . . ."

Children can also read to learn about other times and places. Students can travel through time to other eras in books which give insights into ways people lived and problems they encountered. Such books are available for even the youngest readers. Thy Friend, Obadiah by Brinton Turkle, provides a vivid picture of the sights, sounds, and smells of Nantucket Island in the time of the Quakers. Children will discover Obadiah's problem is a common one, despite the remoteness of the time.

Children can travel to remote parts of our country and even more remote parts of the world in books giving a clear sense of another place. They understand the appeal of the rocky shores of New England when they read One Morning in Maine by Robert McCloskey who captures with authenticity the reaction to a loose, then lost tooth.

In contrast, children move vicariously through the crowded streets of San Francisco's Chinatown in Dragonwings, a sensitive novel of a young boy's adjustment to an alien culture. The book, a Newbery Honor Award winner, contrasts two distinct environments, Chinatown and Nob Hill, both of which may be very different from the places readers live.

Authors provide penetrating glimpses into other places and life in other countries. Children get a detail-packed view of life in the Netherlands in The Wheel on the School from the pen of Meindert de Jong, a prolific author writing remembrances of his own childhood.

Half a world away, the mood is quite different as we sense the panic of Graham, Wallace, and Harry when their methylated heater tips over. The fire thus accidentally set in the parched Australian bush causes an inferno which threatens the lives of hundreds. The desperation of the three boys draws us relentlessly into the fast-moving plot of author Ivan Southall's Ash Road. One teacher of intermediate-grade children read the story to her children, sharing a chapter a day. Concerned with the children's ability to empathize with a character, she asked students to write a radio interview in which an interviewer would talk with one of the three boys. Responding as one of the characters in the book was an interesting challenge for these children.

The Interview

Announcer:	Hello. This is Cid Maxwell in the town of Tinley, which just a few hours ago was engulfed in flames. The cause--fire, of course. A huge fire that wiped out thousands of acres of forest. Now standing right here next to me is the person responsible for the fire, Graham Mallcan. My first question is: was the fire lit deliberately?
Graham:	No, it was not. It was an accident. I didn't mean it to happen the way it did.
Announcer:	Tell me, how did it happen?
Graham:	Well everything went so fast, but all I know is it was an accident. I made some coffee and the heater caught on fire.
Announcer:	Did you try to put it out?
Graham:	Yes, we tried to stomp it out.
Announcer:	You said we. Who is we?
Graham:	Wallace Martin and I.
Announcer:	What did you do when you found out you couldn't put it out?
Graham:	We woke up Harry and started fleeing.
Announcer:	What were Harry's feelings when he saw what you and Wallace had done?
Graham:	Well, I can't speak for Harry, but I reckon he was surprised.
Announcer:	Graham, where did the fire start?
Graham:	By a creek, a little beyond Tinley.
Announcer:	You said by a creek. Why didn't you try to put it out with water from the creek?
Graham:	Everything happened so fast, but now that I think back, I reckon I could have.
Announcer:	Do you realize what you have done?
Graham:	Yes, and I'm very sorry. I wish I could undo what I already did. What can I say? I'm sorry.
Announcer:	This is Cid Maxwell, signing off. Peter

Another book, Petrouchka, by Elizabeth Cleaver, evokes the Russian world in a time long gone. In this elegant new book, collages of cut and pasted monoprints capture the decorative beauty of the society being shown.

Recent historic fiction also transports readers to distant places. We empathize with LaVerne in During Water Peaches, set in a California produce valley in 1943. Ray's life style in Black Cow Summer is very different from LaVerne's. This book by Richard Graber is set in a small Minnesota town during the 1930s.

The authors of these two books make us sense that we were there, then, though for many of us those are times never experienced or places never visited. Yet through the activities, clothes, conflicts and hopes explored, we can experience the time and place.

Children read in quest of information; often the information in trade books will be more compelling than similar material in texts. Trade books offer writers more freedom in writing than do text books, which are usually conceived in sequential order with concepts and vocabulary carefully controlled for maximum readership. Trade books can afford to be more selective in the concepts they present, more imaginative in the treatment of the subject, and more sophisticated in the vocabulary and language patterns they use.

Information books are available to help children in all subject matter areas. In science, books about animals present facts and figures compellingly. Holling C. Holling, the author of Pagoo, writes clearly and concisely about a sea animal and also provides both four-color and black-and-white drawings.

> Little Pagurus--"Pagoo" for short--floated at the surface of the sea. Pagoo would grow into a two-fisted Hermit Crab if he could make it. Someday he would live near shore, walking on a sea floor of rock and sand. But before he could walk on the sea's bottom he must drift on its top, as helpless as a tiny fleck of foam. Pagoo's chances of growing up were not very good.
>
> Pagoo was quite small, because he had just been hatched from an egg the size of a pencil dot. You could see part way through him--that is, if you first could find his glassy body. Whatever he looked like, it certainly was not a two-fisted, happy-to-lucky Hermit Crab. His large eyes looked like eyes, but the rest of him was all points and joints and fuzzy places. If he had been larger he might pass as a fancy ornament for a Christmas tree. But he was not up in a tree; he was down in a salty ocean.

> Pagoo was lucky to be so small, to have a glass body looking like the water around him, to be almost invisible. In this big ocean, being seen could bring death. Even now, shadows of death swam toward him--gigantic Things almost half an inch long! Behind Pagoo, in front of Pagoo, below, above, on both sides of him the shadowy things were gliding with mouths wide open. They were swallowing sparkly creatures like Pagoo, bright flecks in the water which glittered, danced, and then disappeared. The giant shadows sucked up his shimmering neighbors, somehow passed him by, and little Pagoo was left in the sea with nothing to look at but water.

Some information books are ones children will read themselves. Olympic Games in Ancient Greece, by author Shirley Glubok, features pictures by Alfred Tamarin. Other books teachers might read to children. An example is Children in Art by Sedgwick and Frischkorn. Others are primarily reference books, i.e., Light the Candles! Beat the Drums!

If we are to help children read for these purposes, we must think about how to select good books instead of those which are less good.

CRITERIA

In choosing books, either for children to read themselves or for us to share aloud, we need evaluative criteria. We read aloud to children for several reasons:

a) The sheer volume of books produced means some fine ones may be overlooked unless we read to students. Publishers produce 2,500 per year and we select and read to widen children's acquaintance with what is available.

b) Outcomes of hearing books read aloud have been well documented in research. We have ample evidence of the effect of such reading aloud on children's language and reading abilities.

c) To broaden choices, read what students can't or won't. We read some genres like biography which is popular with few children. We read

books like Wind in the Willows which are appropriate psychologically before most children's reading skills will allow them to read with enjoyment.

What are we looking for when we choose books? It seems to me that we examine books for seven characteristics of excellence. The first of these is (1) characterization. "Are the people believable?" we ask.

Authors develop characters in two ways. These techniques for establishing characters are exemplified in The Green Man by Gail Haley. In some instances, the author simply tells about the person. "Claude was the only son of Squire Archibald. He was arrogant, vain, and selfish. He spent most of his time hunting, hawking, and riding about the countryside in his fine clothes."

At other times, authors show us without making a comment:

"Look at those ignorant peasants putting food out for the Green Man when they can hardly feed their own children."

"They are grateful, for the Green Man keeps their animals healthy. He protects their children. Without him, the crops would not grow."

"Rubbish! Those are just silly tales. There is no Green Man!" Haley does not comment further on this, but rather simply lets readers derive understanding from it as they can.

2. A second criteria is dialogue. The conversations should sound like real people talking. An author with a skilled ear for recreating authentic dialogue is Florence Perry Heide. The conversations in The Shrinking of Treehorn reveal her ability in this area.

> When he went into class, his teacher said, 'Nursery school is down at the end of the hall, honey.'
> 'I'm Treehorn,' said Treehorn.
> 'If you're Treehorn, why are you so small?' asked the teacher.

'Because I'm shrinking,' said Treehorn. 'I'm getting smaller.'

'Well, I'll let it go for today,' said his teacher. 'But see that it's taken care of before tomorrow. We don't shrink in this class.'

After recess, Treehorn was thirsty, so he went down the hall to the water bubbler. He couldn't reach it, and he tried to jump up high enough. He still couldn't get a drink, but he kept jumping up and down, trying.

His teacher walked by. 'Why Treehorn,' she said. 'That isn't like you, jumping up and down in the hall. Just because you're shrinking, it does not mean you have special privileges. What if all the children in the school started jumping up and down in the halls? I'm afraid you'll have to go to the Principal's office, Treehorn.'

The characterization of the teacher's language is a wonderfully effective evocation of "teacher talk."

3. A third criterion is setting. An especially fine example is available in The Hounded Wolf by Jean Craighead George. The book features pictures in black ink by the superbly talented illustrator, John Schoenherr. The wolves live on remote Toklat Ridge, (which is) "a massive spine of rock and ice." When dawn strikes it, the spine "lights up with sparks and stars." Later,

> "A frigid blast picks up long shawls of snow and drapes them young Roko and his pack." Note the repetition of the s sound in that sentence. Sound carries: "His voice rolls out across the valley. It penetrates the rocky cracks where the ravens rest."
>
> "The wind slams snow on Toklat Ridge. Massive clouds blot out the sun."

4. The author's ability to write effective plot is also critical. We need to ask ourselves "Is the plot believable?" For some books that was not the author's intent. If that is the case, we need to ask:"If illogical, is it compelling enough to make readers not notice the illogic?" Most plot in children's books is straightforward--from beginning to end. Those with flashbacks are less common. As a device, flashbacks are most often used in fantasy. Cat in the Mirror, by Mary Stoltz is a fine example of a fantasy set

in historic time, which is embedded in a modern realistic story. Another example is Cave Beyond Time by Malcolm Bosse, an elemental survival story about a teen age boy in Arizona, amidst the desert and rattlesnakes. He visits two different previous times and the descriptions of these are rich in cultural details.

5. Another evaluative criterion is the author's use of conflict. A variety of kinds of conflict are present in a collection of twelve short stories included in Rogues,Stories of Swindlers, Thieves and Confidence Men, edited by Leo Hamalian. For intermediate- or upper-grade readers, this includes such well-known short story authors as O. Henry. His contribution to the collection begins: "Jeff Peters has been engaged in as many schemes for making money as there are recipes for cooking rice in Charleston, S.C." These stories are also good for reading one each day to 5th/6th graders if you have a group of slow readers.

6. How successful is the resolution of the story? Typically children's books end on a positive or neutral note. Less frequently they just stop, without any readily identifiable ending. In "The Key," one of three short stories in a book of the same title by Florence Perry Heide, the unnamed child who is the main character deals with tragedy and loss, and at the end, one doesn't know what will happen to him. He is living in a city apartment with Mae, and the relationship is never fully defined. In the end, when he returns to the apartment, having escaped from what appears to be a hospital or home for children, the building is being torn down. There is no indication of what will happen to him, or if indeed he will survive at all. This resolution is very different than that which happens to a similar child in Slake's Limbo by

Felice Holman. Though it is equally gritty realism, this book ends on a potentially positive note.

7. A last literary element on which a book should be evaluated is theme, or the author's underlying idea. In talking with students about theme, I often ask them to consider what is the message, or the big thought. After all details are stripped away, what is left? In the context of Alexis and the Golden Ring by Linda Heller, the theme could be stated this way:

> "In conflict between desire and duty, duty should win out. If it does, those who attend to duty will prevail and be rewarded."

That statement of theme is quite different than a recapitulation of the plot. Alexis, going to marry his beautiful Natasha, finds himself delayed along the way as he helps an impoverished old lady. Because of his kindness, she gives him a golden ring. The ring helps him overcome all sorts of physical dangers as he finally goes along to his bride.

ELICITING RESPONSE

After choosing a book to share you will want to think of possible modes of response. This is based on the premise that knowing about books is not enough. The teacher must also know how to use books to elicit a response.

Following Up a Book

A teacher can plan many kinds of follow-up activities for children. Having said that, however, teachers need to be cautioned that the first kind of follow-up is not to follow-up at all. Some books are so special to the reader that to insist on a culminating activity may spoil the effect. We have probably all finished a book and wanted simply to sit for awhile and respond silently. In that quiet rethinking, questioning, or reacting, we are making the only response necessary. Many times children feel this way and sensitive teachers respect their judgment by not asking for an external response.

Modes of Response

At other times, teachers can ask children to follow up a piece of literature in a variety of ways. The response may be:

1. verbal. Teachers can discuss with children their reactions to a piece, asking them questions that go beyond the story. They may provide opportunity for children to make up a radio play based on the story. Or they might ask children to do a mock interview with a reporter and one of the book characters.

   For example, we might ask students to imagine that they are a reporter, interviewing the main character in Captain Toad and the Motor Bike by David McPhail. The captain is an adventuresome sort who takes up riding after retirement. The strange way he wins the race makes him a logical candidate for a radio interview. Pairs of students can work together, one as the interviewer and one as Captain Toad, investigating Toad's reaction to his unexpected victory.

2. verbal and physical. Teachers can encourage children to dramatize part of a story they have read. Many books contain scenes or a sequence of scenes that can serve as a basis for dramatization. The ride on the el, the baseball game, and how Chet and Tony solve their problem are among scenes which children can dramatize in A Ride On High by Candida Palmer. Or, we might use the version of Little Red Riding Hood with pictures by Edward Gorey. Many mime actions in the story lay a groundwork for more extended scene development as children choose a favorite part of the story to dramatize.

3. visual. Teachers can encourage children to build a model of a building crucial to the story, illustrate their favorite part of the story, or make a "movie" out of a continuous roll of paper wound on two dowels. Viollet is a compelling story of a thrush who cannot sing and is illustrated with rather nondescript black-and-white illustrations. A teacher could read this story by Julia Conningham to children and then ask them to paint pictures of the part of the story they like best. Upper-intermediate-grade students could make models of the castle to which the crippled boy, Robin, goes in The Door in the Wall. This story by Marguerite de Angeli gives readers a pleasant sense of another time. After hearing it, children could use balsa wood and glue to construct a model of the castle.

Students could make a movie of the action in The Pigs' Wedding with humorous watercolor sketches by Helme Heine. Another story with a lot of action appropriate for presenting in this mode is Little Chick's Story by Mary Kwitz. Kindergarten or first-grade boys and girls could each illustrate a scene from the book. These separate scenes could then be strung together in proper sequence to make a movie.

4. musical. Teachers can ask children to work with the music teacher to create a simple melody and set the verses in a story to song. Begin with simple songs like those Francis, the badger sings to herself. In A Bargain for Frances her friend Thelma has hoodwinked Frances out of the tea set she really wants. Frances tries to convince herself that the one she got is really acceptable, though secretly she knows it isn't. In trying to convince herself, Frances sings:

A plastic pot can pour the tea
For my dolls and friends and me
Just as well as china.
Red is just as good as blue.
Plastic cups are all right too,
Just as good as china.

Another story for primary children is Hickory, by Palmer Brown. This gentle, pastoral tale tells of a family of mice living snugly in a clock, until their oldest son ventures into the world to seek adventure. Before he leaves, Hickory's mother sings as she tidies up their home:

A little house, a little room,
To keep it swept, a little broom . . .
A little table, and, oh, please,
A little bread, a little cheese.

As Hickory travels, he sings an old song his mother taught him:

How many miles to Babylon?
Three score miles and ten.
Can I get there by candle-light?
Yes, and back again.

Hickory meets Hop, a lady grasshopper, who also sings:

My life is but a summer song,
a little carol in the sun.
Now, when the nights grow cold and long,
The song I sing will soon be done.

As they travel together their affection grows, despite their differences. They discuss how different viewpoints can enrich experience. Just before the hard frost that will end Hop's life, they alternate lines of their verses, and make an eight line song together.

Stories for intermediate grades also include verses which could be set to music. A useful story is "Momotaro, or the Story of the Son of a Peach." In this Japanese tale, a couple lives in sorrow because they have no son. One day, while washing clothes in the river, the old woman sees a giant peach floating in the water, and she lures it to shore by singing the following:

Distant water is bitter,
The near water is sweet;
Pass by the distant water
And come into the sweet.

Her song is successful: the peach drifts toward shore. When she and her husband cut it open, they discover a small boy who has been sent to be their child.

We can also move from song to word story with children. A teacher of first grade used "Mary Had a Little Lamb" with her class. After this group activity of singing the nursery rhyme, individual children were encouraged to dictate their own word version of the song. Beth dictated the following:

> Once upon a time the lamb was lost. Right when Mary went to school, she went back home to see if the sheep is still, if her sheep is by her house. Nowhere. Her lamb was lost. She liked to play with her friends at school but she couldn't because she had to look for her lamb. She looked at her school. No lamb. She looked on the monkey bars at the playground. No lamb. She looked at the barbershop. No lamb. She tiptoed into the house and looked under the bed. No lamb. She looked in the water. No lamb. She looked by the river. No lamb. She looked by the lightpost. No lamb. She looked by the bus. No lamb. She looked everywhere. No lamb. What could Mary do? Mary looked on the green, green meadow for a very nice cool drink, where the drinking fountain is. And then she is looking and looking. All day long until night. and at night she went home. She put on her pajamas and went to sleep, thinking about that lost lamb. And all of a sudden, boom, boom, boom, boom. It started to rain. And then, knock, knock. And then Mary said, "Come on in." And then a man said, "Is this your lamb? I found a lamb over the river." "Ya, that's my lamb," she said. Then she found her lamb, so they lived happily ever after.

5. a composition. Children can write something about a piece of literature. A teacher might ask children to create another story along the same plot lines as a sample, to complete a story, or to rewrite a story from a different character's point of view. Or a teacher could introduce children to haiku and ask them to write a poem of their own. Children might be asked to create another story along the same lines as

"A New House" from Grasshopper on the Road by Arnold Lobel. In this story a creature loses his house, searches for a replacement and eventually though inadvertently, finds a new one. The task of completing a story which was read to a critical point is a useful composition experience. Read A Color of His Own by Leo Lionni, to the point where the two chameleons consider the question, "Won't we ever have a color of our own?" Then ask children to dictate or write their own ending to the story.

Or students might rewrite from another point of view. Use Mice Twice by Joseph Low, a beguiling account of cat and mouse trouble. Then have students rewrite the simple adventure as if they were the mouse, or as if they were the cat. I find such rewriting tasks are very useful with intermediate or older students, who are usually very pleased to rewrite a story to be shared with primary-age children.

Another possibility is to use Cinderella, and have students rewrite it as if they were one of the characters.

> I am Cinderella, dressed in rags. I live with my stepmother and stepsisters. I sleep on ashes by the fireplace. I have to clean the house every day.
>
> The Prince was giving a ball. My mother wouldn't let me go to the ball. Then I had an idea. I asked my hazel tree. Of course it was magic, and so was the mourning dove.
>
> First I had to curl up my hair in a bun. Then I asked for a pretty dress and some slippers. Then I was almost ready for the ball.
>
> I danced with a handsome prince. He said he wouldn't let anyone else dance with me, so I danced with him until the clock struck midnight. Then I had to go, but I said to myself, "I'll see that prince again," and I did see him again.
>
> One night I lost my slipper, and the prince found it. He searched and searched, and finally he came to the last house. He tried the slipper on both stepsisters, but it didn't fit. Finally he came to me. That slipper was mine, and then it happened. I was his bride. I lived with him in the castle, and the dove, and we lied happily ever after.[1]

Other folktales which work well for this purpose include Hansel and Gretel, and Thumbelina.

Parallel Plot Construction is another composition task that helps improve students' writing ability. I read a story to students, and then outline the sequence of units of action on the board. These units then become the basis for another story modeled on the original. In The Cobbler's Reward we have a very strong story structure. After listening to this, one fifth grade class analyzed the action. Then Laurel wrote the following variant.

> Once there was a poor boy named Donald who lived with his father at the edge of Happy Forest. His father was a tailor, but this year business had been going terrible. One day, Donald said to his father, "Dad, I'm old enough now to be out on my own, and I'd like to seek my fortune." His father was amazed, but said, "Yes." Donald was overjoyed and said, "I'll miss you." So the next morning at dawn, Donald went out to seek his fortune.
>
> He started into the forest feeling very pleased with himself. But before long, Donald got very tired, and stopped to rest in a grassy field. And there in the middle of the field, Donald saw a destroyed grasshopper's nest. When he saw that, he just had to help the poor things. So he went over and said, "Don't worry, I will build you a whole new nest in no time at all." When Donald was finished, the head grasshopper came up and said, "We are very grateful for what you have just done. If you are in any trouble, at any time, we will help you." Donald said, "Amazing!" He thanked them for their offer.
>
> Later, he came to a cliff and said, "Interesting," and climbed up. And there in front of him, he saw an eagle's nest that was just about to fall! There were only little baby eagles in the nest! Donald reached out and grabbed the nest just in time. Donald waited until the mother came back. When the mother eagle came back, Donald told her all that happened. The mother was very grateful and said, "If you are in any trouble at any time, we will help you." Donald thanked the eagle for her offer, and went on.
>
> Finally, he was almost at the end of the forest. And then, he stopped, for he saw a tree that was on fire! He rushed over and saw that there were a family of squirrels living in that tree! He quickly put his hand into the nest and grabbed every squirrel he could see. When he put the family of squirrels in another tree and went on his way, the Mother squirrel was following him. So he stopped and turned around. The Mother squirrel was trying to get his attention. Donald stopped and listened. The Mother squirrel said this, "If you are in any trouble at any time, we'll help you." Donald thanked her for her offer and went on.

About an hour later, Donald arrived at a strange village called Ronta. In the middle of the village there was a mob of people. Donald went over and asked a man what was going on. The man answered, "The girl has been kidnapped by the wizzard known as Hagatha." Donald said, "How will she ever be free?" The man said, "Any man who has the courage to free her may make her his wife. But in order to do this, he must perform two tasks and answer a riddle." Donald said, "I'm going to free that girl." Donald asked, "Has any boy tried to free the girl?" "Yes," the man answered, "but every man got their head chopped off." "I'm still going to free that girl," said Donald. So Donald went up to the castle door and knocked on it. Hagatha opened the door, looked at Donald; and asked, "What do you want?" Donald said, "I would like to try to free the girl." "Very well!" "Very well!" "Come with me." Hagatha led Donald down a very, very long corridor. When they got to the door, Hagatha said, "Come in." Hagatha put Donald in a strange room, and said, "Here is a shaggy carpet that contains three grains of sand mixed up in the carpet. You must find those three grains by dawn, or your head will be chopped off!" "Goodbye!" Donald could have cried. How was he supposed to find three grains of sand in a shaggy carpet? "Impossible!" he thought.

Just then, the mother eagle and her babies came flying in through the window. 'What kind of trouble are you in?" the mother eagle asked. "I have to find three grains of sand in this shaggy carpet by dawn, or else my head will be chopped off!" "That's simple," said the mother eagle. "Get to work!" she ordered her children. In ten minutes, the three grains of sand had been found. "Thank you so much!" said Donald. The mother eagle said, "You are very welcome."

At dawn, Hagatha came in and said, "Did you find the three grains of sand like I asked?" she bellowed. "Yes, here they are," replied Donald. "Disgusting!" Hagatha hissed at what she saw. "But you still have another task to do," she said. "Follow me to another room." And there, on top of the ceiling was a 5-dollar bill. "What is that 5-dollar bill doing on the ceiling?" he asked. "Well, Hagatha said, "In this bare room, from the floor to the ceiling, it is twenty feet high. Your job is to get the 5-dollar bill off the ceiling by dawn, or else!" Hagatha chuckled to herself as she left. Donald cried and cried.

All of a sudden, twenty big grasshoppers flew in the window. "What's the trouble?" asked a grasshopper. "Well, I have to get that 5-dollar bill off the ceiling by dawn, or off with my head!" he cried. "No sweat," said the grasshopper. In a flash, the biggest grasshopper was on his way up to the ceiling, and in a flash, he was down again with the money in his mouth. "Gee, Thanks so much!" Donald said. Hagatha was in the room at dawn. "Well!" she snickered, "Is it off with your head or not?" "No," said Donald. "What!" Hagatha cried. "Here is your money." "Hmm," she thought, you still have to solve that clever riddle," she said. "Oh, no" thought Donald. She led Donald into another room. "This is your last day living for sure!" "Here's the riddle: You must take this pile of chestnuts and pick out the one that has the penney in it," she said. But as soon as she left, the squirrels came tumbling in. "Thanks a whole lot," said Donald.

At dawn, Hagatha was there, and asked for the nut. "Here," said Donald. The wizard was so furious that she turned herself into a big black cat and ran off. Then Donald ran out of the door, found the girl, and they got married that very same day. And to this day, they are still living very happily in the city of Ronta.

Summary

Every child responds with zest to one of these techniques at one time or another. We all like to share with others something we have read which touched us. But no child will respond with anything but dutiful compliance if asked to follow up every book with some sort of culminating activity. Knowing about books is not enough; knowing what to do with books is crucial. But the sensitivity to know which project is best for which child following which book cannot be prescribed. Those decisions are intuitive ones, made by a talented teacher who sees using literature as one way of facilitating the expressive abilities of children.

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Note by the author

[1]This story is taken from Read to Write. Using Children's Literature as a Springboard for Teaching Writing. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980, p. 76.

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